

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 28

October 14, 2007

2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c

Psalm 111

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

I would guess that most of you have had, at one time or another, what you would call a “lousy day”. I read about a man who was sitting by himself at a bar looking at his drink. He stayed like that for half-an-hour. Finally, a burley trouble-making truck driver walked up next to him, grabbed the man’s drink from him, and gulped it down in one swallow.

At that point, the man burst into tears. The truck driver said, “Come on man, I was just joking, no harm done. Here, I will buy you another drink. I just can’t stand to see a grown man crying.” “No, it’s not that,” the man said. “Today has been the worst day of my life.

First, I overslept and was late to an important meeting. My boss was outraged. He called me into his office and asked for my resignation. When I left the office, I discovered that my car had been stolen, and the police said that there was really nothing that they could do.

I took a cab home, and as the driver drove away, I realized that I had left my wallet in the back seat of the taxi. I thought that the day could not get any worse. But when I walked into my house, I found my wife in the arms of another man, and she told me that she was leaving me.

So I stopped by a chemical store, and then came here. I’ve been sitting here contemplating taking my own life. Then you come by and drink all of my poison!”

I would say that both of those guys were having a bad day. Contrary to what some Christians claim, Jesus never promised that our lives would be free from pain and suffering.

As a matter of fact, Jesus promised that if we follow him, we would be faced with many trials and tribulations. So to whom do we turn to when circumstances in our lives seem to be just too much to bear?

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. As he entered a small village, ten lepers approached him. Now, if you were a leper, every day was a bad day. I believe that in previous sermons I have talked about the horrific affects of this disease.

Basically, your body begins to rot away. You would first lose your toes, fingers, ears, and nose. Soon entire limbs would disintegrate. Therefore, you died a slow and painful death, cut off from society, cut off from family since it is very contagious.

The only friendships that you had were with those who were like you. And if that was not bad enough, at that time, people believed that if you had leprosy, you were the vilest kind of sinner. For God was punishing you for something really bad.

So these ten lepers find out that a man named Jesus was coming into town. They had heard that he had the power to heal. As Jesus walks down the road, they approach him still keeping their distance. They shout out; "Unclean, unclean." For that was required of lepers when those who were uninfected approached.

You wonder what was going through their minds. "Is it true, can this Jesus really make people whole again? Is there some hope even for me?" These ten dying, decaying, stinking wretches met Jesus and cried, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

Now don't you find it interesting their choice of words? They didn't say; "Jesus, please heal us." They said; "have mercy on us!" So what is mercy anyway? Well, mercy can be described as "receiving something positive that you do not deserve" or "not receiving something negative that you do deserve."

So when these lepers called out for mercy, they were actually asking Jesus not to condemn them for having leprosy. Now this may sound strange to us. Why would you condemn someone for having a terrible disease? But again, these lepers thought that their leprosy was a form of punishment for sin. So they plead to Jesus to have mercy on them.

Today, we know a little more about diseases and their causes. We also know that not all diseases can be directly linked to particular sinful behavior.

Even so, we still cry out for mercy. It is called “The Kyrie.” “Kyrie eleison!” – the Greek phrase for; “Lord have mercy!” It is the cry of the faithful as we bring the cares and concerns of our lives before God.

These words are found in the gathering rite of our worship and are frequently included in the prayers of the church. Kyrie eleison... as we pray for the church, our world and ourselves. Kyrie eleison... as we confess to our brokenness and seek God’s forgiveness. Kyrie eleison... as we ask for strength to face what may lie ahead.

Every week, we too call upon Jesus for mercy. Mercy for what you might ask? We ask Jesus to satisfy the deepest need of our soul – that is, to be forgiven and loved unconditionally. You see, we yearn to be loved and accepted. That’s how we were created.

And that’s why whenever we are feeling lonely – whenever we feel abandoned – whenever we feel betrayed, we can always turn to God in prayer. For God comes to us and says; “I am here. I made you with my own hands. And I will love you forever no matter what.

And when we, as sinful humans, receive God’s love and forgiveness – when we actually deserve judgment and death, our only response can be one of humble thanks.

So as the story goes, Jesus cures the ten lepers, but only one returns to give thanks. It was a Samaritan. And Jesus says to him, “Your faith has made you well.”

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that the nine who did not return to thank Jesus acted obediently, following the law. The tenth acted like a man in love. And when you’re in love, the law, tradition and ritual, all those normal borders and boundaries, are shoved aside.

You see, love goes beyond the law. We can live our lives thinking that we are pretty good people. We didn’t kill anyone, didn’t steal anything, we didn’t commit adultery.

But as the Apostle Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, “If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

In response to God’s grace, the Samaritan doesn’t follow the law, but follows his heart to find and thank the one who is the source of his new life. For when you have love in your heart, who needs all of the rules and regulations?

Now as I see it, there are three types of giving thanks. First, there is a thankfulness based on comparison

A few years ago, there was a peanuts cartoon that pictured Charlie Brown bringing out Snoopy's dinner on Thanksgiving Day. However, it was not something special, it was just his usual dog food in a bowl.

Snoopy took one look at the dog food and said, "This isn't fair. The rest of the world is eating turkey with all the trimmings, and all I get is this same old dog food. Just because I'm a dog, all I get is dog food." He stood there and stared at his dog food for a moment, and said, "I guess it could be worse. I could be a turkey."

The thing is, is that there was very little joy in Snoopy's thankfulness. For his thankfulness was based on a comparison. His thankfulness was based on the fact that he was better off than the turkey. Therein lies a small lesson in thankfulness.

When we're down in the dumps and full of complaints because life isn't fair, we convince ourselves to be thankful because there are so many that are worse off than us. When we see others having problems in life, we say; "Whew, I'm thankful that I'm not her," or "I am so thankful that I don't have to live like that."

The second kind of thankfulness has to do with respectfulness or politeness. How often do we find ourselves prompting our children to say "thank you?" Whenever they are offered a treat from a friend or an adult helps them out, we find ourselves asking, "Now, what do you say?"

Perhaps we give thanks before meals as a form of paying respect to a family tradition. We want our children to be respectful and use good manners. That is why we teach them to say "Thank you."

And please know that this is a good thing. I whole-heartedly promote such behavior. But I wonder if in our attempt to produce properly mannered children, we actually overlook the thankfulness within "Thank you."

Do we bring children to a place where thankfulness is more than polite, a thankfulness that becomes part of who they are? Are WE at a place where thankfulness is a recognizable part of who WE are? Do people say about us; "that person is always thankful no matter what their situation?"

Again, going back to our story. Ten lepers plead for mercy, ten were cured, but only one gave thanks. I would suggest that even though all ten lepers were cured of their disease, only one was made whole. Only one found true healing.

And this brings us to the third type of thankfulness. This thankfulness has more to do with healing and wholeness. When we truly embrace God with a thankfulness of the heart, whether we live in God's care or die in God's loving arms, we have healing and

wholeness.

For a heart full of thankfulness is a sign of wholeness. Perhaps it appears on a deathbed where cure has never arrived. Perhaps it appears in a garbage dump where a day's search for food was in vain. Perhaps it appears in the face of a lonely widow.

You know who these people are – the ones who have a heart of thankfulness no matter what their situation. And there is something else we notice about these people. They seem to share more. They are more giving of their lives, whether it be their time, their talents, or their resources.

You see, when we live life with a spirit of thankfulness, we realize that life is a gift – a precious gift from God. We are able to see things in a whole new light.

We begin to notice God's beautiful creation – the twinkling of a star, the fluttering of a butterfly, the beauty of a field of wild flowers, the smile of a child. And we begin to become a better steward of what God has entrusted to us.

Living a life with a spirit of thankfulness also gives us hope. And in that hope we are driven to faith. And through that faith, we are made whole. That is when Jesus can say to us; "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

For as we have been marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed gathered, and sent for the sake of the world. And that is indeed something to be thankful for. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.